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ABSTRACT

This digest addresses the uses of oral history projects in the secondary U.S. history classroom. The document advocates that oral history is a stimulating classroom process designed to increase student involvement in a United States history class and improve student understanding of a relatively recent historical period. Oral history also involves students directly in a method of historical inquiry, which includes the organization and presentation of data acquired directly from another person. Suggestions are given for topic selection, interviewing techniques, and timeline development. (EH)

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Level 1

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Oral History in the Teaching of U. S. History

by Carl R. Siler

Oral history is a stimulating classroom activity and an exciting process designed to increase student involvement in a United States history class and improve student understanding of the historical topic. Further, oral history involves students directly in a method of historical inquiry, which includes the organization and presentation of data acquired directly from another person.

Why Have Students Conduct an Oral History Project? An oral history project, regardless of the historical topic being investigated or its duration, helps students understand all phases of designing, implementing, and completing an activity. Students of all learning and comprehension levels can use the oral history process to increase their active involvement in the study of United States history.

An oral history project is an attempt to preserve a small segment of a relatively recent historical period as viewed through the eyes, experiences, and memories of people who lived during that time. Capturing their experiences and memories on either video or audio tape is invaluable. Over a period of time, memories can fade and those feelings or emotions associated with the events can easily be lost or altered by time.

An oral history project involving local participants is an exciting method of providing students the opportunity to "experience" history firsthand, which makes the learning of United States history a more valuable experience and places local history within the overall context of United States history. Participants are eager to share their experiences with students. Students are enthralled to hear the stories of the participants and usually cannot wait to share them with the rest of the class.

Oral history projects add to the collective knowledge of local and national history, because such projects document citizens' participation and memories concerning a specific event or time period. Students begin to understand that United States history is not simply a series of isolated events from the pages of a textbook, but rather it is composed of life experiences and memories of many Americans just like themselves. Students learn that history is in essence the collective memories of actual events that have directly affected the lives of their friends, acquaintances, and relatives.

What Instructional Goals Are Met by Conducting an Oral History Project? An oral history project has a multitude of instructional goals for the students. Students will increase their understanding of a specific historical event. First-person information about any historical event makes it much more relevant to their lives. Students will create and administer various interview instruments. They must pilot the interview instrument to better understand that various questions may elicit unanticipated, unexpected, and unintended answers.

The selection of participants will result in comprehension of the dynamics of time, continuity, and change among age groups.

Students will improve their questioning skills as they ask the various questions and follow-up questions of the "what" variety and the probing questions of "how" and "why." Students will improve their writing skills as they become cognizant of how people use their language skills. Students will enhance their listening skills by accurately listening to what was said, and by listening for how and why the person being interviewed chose to describe an event as he/she did. Students will gain organizational skills pertaining to their use of time, energy, and information. Finally, the students' proofreading skills will be enhanced as they read and re-read their final product to insure accuracy.

What Topics Can Be Used for an Oral History Project? Various topics involving events that are national, state, or local in scope and importance can be used for an oral history project.

Students need to be aware of the dynamics of age and time as they select a historical period. If students select a topic involving the Depression or World War II, they must remember that the participants to be interviewed typically are 65 years of age or older. However, a topic such as the assassination of JFK or the Vietnam War could involve participants as young as 40. The potential pool of participants can be affected by the topic chosen. The level of recollective ability and historical accuracy also can dramatically be affected by the age of the participants being interviewed. Hence, the selection of participants is a critical component for an effective oral history project. Students will soon discover that some participants are simply better interviewees than others. Students will usually approach relatives or friends as their first potential interviewees and then expand their pool of people to be interviewed.

An oral history project can be as simple as a student interviewing one person, writing the responses of the participant, and reporting those survey responses to the class. Another project could involve audio- or video-taping of the participant and the student composing a written account of the dialogue. But a more sophisticated and encompassing oral history project could involve the entire class during a semester or school year. The class would conduct taped interviews throughout the school year, type the dialogue of the interviews, and print the results in a book format. The culmination of the year's project would be to publish the interviews and make the books available to interviewees, students, libraries, and interested individuals in the community.

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What Is Involved in the Process of Conducting an Oral History Project? The oral history project is a process-oriented activity. The students are responsible for the entire project. It is imperative that students have adequate background knowledge of the historical topic and time period before interviewing the participants. Good content knowledge will enhance their understanding of the historical topic or era and vastly improve their questioning skills; thereby, they will have a better understanding of the person being interviewed.

Students must design the interview instrument focusing upon questions that will elicit much more information than merely "yes" or "no" answers. Practice interviews must be conducted to test the interview instrument, which allows students to practice their interview skills and insures the validity of the questions and answers. Students will learn that some questions simply do not ask what was intended.

Students select their own participants to be interviewed and set up an interview time, which helps to enhance their organizational skills. Interviews can be conducted during school time or on the student's time, whatever is convenient for both the student and the participant. It is imperative that the student obtain from the interviewee a signed release form giving the class and the school the right to publish the oral interview. This is important because of the legalities involved in publishing an interview.

All interviews are done with audio or video tape, and typewritten transcripts are made by the students from the recordings. This element of the process takes a considerable amount of time. Students proofread their own material, as well as other students' material, to insure spelling accuracy, historical accuracy, and common formatting.

The final copy can be printed at school, and the school printing department can usually produce multiple copies. Hard-cover bookbinding can be commercially obtained, or soft-cover binding can be done at any instant copy business.

It is imperative that the teacher keep students on task and on schedule with such an oral history project because as the end of the school year approaches, finishing a project of this magnitude can be overwhelming. A convenient timeline is presented below:

- Introduction of Project and Investigation of Event - September
- Creation of Interview Instrument - September
- Interviewing of Participants - October-March
- Transcribing of Tapes - October-March
- Typing of Rough Draft - October-March
- Proofreading and Finalization of Document or Book - April
- Final Copies to Printer and Binder - May-June

The finished product of such an oral history project is a published book that focuses upon a particular topic in United States history encompassing the memories and experiences of local participants. An oral history project, regardless of the topic, grade, or academic level of the students, or sophistication of the final product, is an extremely rewarding experience for the students, participants, and classroom teacher. Because a variety of teaching methodologies and strategies is a vital component of any successful United States history class, an oral history project can be a significant instrument for success. A project of this extent enhances students' understanding of any historical era and improves the quality of teacher instruction. Students will realize through an oral history project that historical events affect the lives of people they know and love. Years after the students have left the classroom, they are more likely to remember the oral history project than other aspects of their United States history class.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia, 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, announced monthly in the CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from the UMI reprint service.

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